Interview with CAPT Alfred Littlefield Smith, MC, USN, (Ret.), Yangtze patroller and World War II prisoner of war by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Richmond, VA, 16 Dec 1985. (1908-1993)

CAPT Alfred L. Smith was a lieutenant when Corregidor fell on 6 May 1942. His nearly 34 months in Bilibid prison left him ill, malnourished, and nearly blind. Yet, he points out, it may have been his poor condition that kept him off the unmarked Japanese death ships that were torpedoed by US Navy submarines in late 1944-45. In fact, he was the only officer from the crew of the Yangtze River patrol boat USS Luzon who came home.

What was your first assignment after reporting to the Asiatic Squadron in 1939?

The Cavite Navy Yard dispensary in the Philippines. I was there about 6 months before being assigned to the U.S. Naval Hospital at Canacao near Manila and then the Fourth Marines in Shanghai before I was transferred to Camp Holcomb in north China. In August of 1940 we evacuated to Shanghai, where I went on river patrol duty aboard the USS *Luzon*.

What was it like being a Yangtze Patroller?

To be truthful, there often wasn't much to keep us occupied. You're on a ship with a hundred sailors, all rough and ready and well-tattooed. I'd hold sick call and find that nobody was sick. My workday began at 8 o'clock and was over by 8:05.

What did you do with all that spare time?

We patrolled up and down the river until I knew the Yangtze better than the back of my hand. I saw things I had never seen before. One time I went ashore, not too far from where the Panay was sunk. There was a little Chinese hospital with a ward filled with about 30 people. It seemed very strange that no one was sitting up or showing any signs of life. "What's wrong with them?" I asked. They all had leishmaniasis. I had never seen a single case in my life and suddenly there was a whole ward full.

Were the Japanese very much in evidence?

Oh yes. When we patrolled the river we went through territory they controlled. And it was the same when we played golf. To get to the golf course we had to stop at a Japanese checkpoint. When they saw the American flag and stars on the bumper they usually waved us through.

When did things really begin heating up?

In November of '41 a telegram came ordering the Fourth Marines and river gunboats to proceed to Manila. By then, the *Luzon*'s sides had been raised and reinforced with planks.

That must have been a memorable cruise.

When we passed Formosa we could see Japanese ships waiting. They signaled for us to stop and head back to China. But RADM Glassford [William A. Glassford, Jr.] replied that he was proceeding south. One of the cruisers aimed its guns but didn't fire. I didn't know it at the time but one of our submarines was accompanying us. I never saw it until we approached Luzon and it surfaced nearby. Later I learned that had the cruiser opened fire it would have been torpedoed.

It took us 4 days through the worst weather I'd ever seen. The *Luzon* had never been in the ocean before and even though we had boarded her up she took water and rolled like crazy. Once she tipped 45 degrees one way and 46 degrees the other. Dishes on shelves with a side rail came over the rail and smashed all over the deck. When we got to Manila someone pointed out that the sides of the boat had bent between each rib.

Do you recall the date you got there?

It was December 4th. I had already been out there 2 1/2 years and should have been back in the States. Transportation was sitting right there in Manila Harbor. I think ADM Hart [Thomas C. Hart, Commander in Chief, U.S. Asiatic Fleet] knew what was up.

You mean he knew the war was coming?

Yes. My orders and many others' were on his desk waiting to be signed. On Sunday, the day before Pearl Harbor, a CDR Harris and some other officer went out to the golf course. After the 18th hole everyone came into the clubhouse for a drink. Harris sat down nearby ADM Hart and asked him about his orders. Hart said, "Your orders are on my desk with a stack that high. If everything is all right tomorrow at 10 o'clock, come by and I'll have them signed."

I can't believe that Hart didn't know something was going to happen. The next morning at 4:10 am the pharmacist's mate came down, tapped on my door and said "Doctor, don't turn on the light and don't light a cigarette. We're at war with Japan." Needless to say, no one went to the admiral's office to pick up any orders.

I guess ADM Hart figured he needed all the trained men he could get.

Probably so. He may have been tipped off by Washington that something was up. Well, then the American President Lines ship with my stateroom shoved off and went back to the States. And there I was.

How long was it before things began getting rough?

About 24 hours. We saw them bomb Nichols and Clark Fields. Two days later, 21 bombers flattened the Cavite Navy Yard in less than an hour. I was sitting on the Luzon about 200 yards offshore. We were a small target and obviously not worth hitting.

Around Christmas--I'm not sure of the date--I recall the skipper standing on the bridge with a pair of binoculars. He saw two bombers coming toward us and shouted, "Full steam ahead, right hard rudder." The ship took a nosedive forward and the bombs dropped where we had been.

Not long after that, we were ordered to sail to Bataan and patrol the coast at night. The Japs would wait until dark and land behind our lines on barges.

How long did that last?

A few weeks at most before we ran out of fuel oil for the gunboat. We then sailed out into Manila Bay and moored just off Fort Hughes to help with beach defense. Hughes was on one of the small islands.

When the Japanese began shelling Corregidor, did they also hit Fort Hughes?

Oh yes. Once they took Bataan they set up their artillery on the beach. We hid in the bushes, in fox holes, or wherever we could find cover. The range was about 4 miles and they

could hit wherever they wanted. There aim was very accurate. They could easily see where the shells landed from a spotter balloon. By then, we had no air force left. I take that back. We actually had one P-40 left. It was pretty beaten up and wired together so it could just barely fly.

About that time, we were told that a submarine was leaving Corregidor and we were all expected to write a letter home. It didn't matter who you wrote to just as long as there was mail for that sub to take. One old sailor protested, saying he had no one to write to. They said, "You'd better find someone because the captain is not gonna like this." So he sat down and wrote: "Dear Mr. President, Please send us another P-40. The one we've got is all worn out." They say that Roosevelt got it.

How did you feel the day Corregidor surrendered?

I was determined to get back to the States. That was not the attitude of everyone there. Many of them had already given up hope. I figured that someday the Yanks and tanks would be back, and when they came I'd still be around. The Japanese brought us to what they called the 92nd Garage Area. It was a mass of humanity with scarcely any room to lie down. During the day, we'd bake in the sun with no shelter. There was no sanitation. We'd have a line waiting for water 200 or 300 long just to get a canteen of water. You got a mess kit full of rice with flies so thick on it you would take a spoon of it and before you would get it to your mouth you couldn't see the rice. Just before you put it in your mouth you'd blow the flies off and eat the stuff. You had no choice; there wasn't anything else.

We were there over a week before they took us by ship to Manila and from there to Bilibid. From that day on I never got outside that prison.

The sanitary conditions were very bad there.

It was pretty bad. The only good thing I could say was that we had running water.

Was rice the main course throughout your imprisonment?

It was the only course. We were fed moldy, musty rice that had been swept up from the floors of warehouses. the Japanese boiled it and it had a very sour taste. You could smell it a mile away. They put it in buckets set on rollers. Those that wouldn't eat it are still out there.

Sometimes we got camote tops. The camote is the Filipino equivalent of a sweet potato. The tops were boiled in rock salt. That was the extent of our greens. On rare occasions we had fish. The Japs didn't clean them, just fried them whole. At first we would pick out the bones, but after a while we ate them from end to end like a cookie.

I read that mongo beans were occasionally available.

Some of the prisoners had Filipino contacts on the outside. Mongo beans look like peas, no bigger than birdshot but are rich in protein. One time a dog got caught in the wire surrounding the camp. We skinned it and boiled it in rock salt. Dogs are not bad eating. Another time the Japanese brought ducks into the prison to eat the garbage we threw out but they got beriberi and starved to death.

What was your average day like in Bilibid?

Every day was pretty much the same. Between work details, we played chess and cards.

Where did the cards come from?

I remember we bought a deck from another prisoner for $50. U.S. currency wasn't worth anything anyway. Fifty bucks for a deck of cards was a real bargain.

Before I got sick I saw patients in the hospital we had set up. We had practically nothing to run it with--no medicine and few instruments. We did have a makeshift operating room, but sterile facilities didn't exist.

Heck, we had every disease you could think of in there--malaria, pellagra, dengue, beriberi, xerophthalmia, yaws, scurvy, elephantiasis, tuberculosis, and general malnutrition. I was sick in bed most of the time with swollen ankles, painful feet, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea. It was at that point that many people said, "Oh hell, I'm not gonna eat that moldy stuff anymore." And they didn't and went right down hill and died. We buried a lot of men behind that prison.

When did you notice that your sight was going?

I had been having some trouble with the sun. My eyes seemed more sensitive than usual. But the blindness came suddenly. I think it was in September of 1942. I was reading a book about the presidents, the life of Andrew Jackson. I was on page 42 and put it aside for the night. The next day I couldn't even find the page number let alone the page. We had an ophthalmologist there at the time. He took one look at my eyes and said I had probably had optic neuritis but now I showed signs of optic atrophy. The nerve endings had almost completely disintegrated.

Was this caused by a vitamin A deficiency?

No, vitamin B, thiamine hydrochloride. Lack of vitamin A causes xerophthalmia, ulcers on the corneas. We had plenty of those cases. When I got back to the States they poured vitamins into me every which way but it didn't do much good.

I understand that one of your comrades had a contraband radio hidden somewhere so you knew how the war was going.

Down at the other end of the hall were four warrant officers. One of them appeared to be a little on the stupid side. He had built himself a stool to sit on. Underneath, he had a compartment with a radio he had put together from scavenged parts. The Japanese appointed these warrant officers to take a head count every day. Often, these counts took place after dark and so the Japs had to furnish flashlights. Needless to say, the batteries didn't last very long in those flashlights. Anyway, they would get news on the radio. They knew the Americans had landed in Bougainville and the southern islands but they didn't tell us. They couldn't tell us. They would wait until the Japanese would send out a working party or there would be a transfer of men. About 4 hours after the newcomers would arrive, the "stupid" one would say. "I heard a good rumor. Americans have landed in Leyte." Never would you get the news right away, only after some group was sent out on a detail to clean up a street or something and they'd come back. Nobody knew where the rumor came from.

After the Americans came, the warrant officer set his stool out on the ground and opened up the top and there was the radio. That was the best kept secret in the camp and the stupid routine was one of the best acts I've ever seen.[1]

[1]The radio man was LT Homer T. Hutchinson, a former mining engineer.

Where did you learn that the Americans were on their way back to the Philippines?

I don't remember the date but it was sometime in '44. It was a bright sunshiny day. Two Japanese planes were practicing dogfighting. Right out of the blue, they turned tail and headed north in a hurry. Within 5 minutes bombs were hitting the port area. We figured our boys weren't too far away. This was right about the time the Japanese began sending our men on convoys north to Japan.

Can you describe your liberation?

On the night of February 4th, 1945, about 8 o'clock in the evening, halftracks and tanks suddenly roared past the prison. you could hear machine gun bullets bouncing off the walls. The tanks never stopped but kept on going. I remember the very first American I saw. He was knocking the boards off the windows with his rifle butt. He looked in and said, "What are you guys doing in here?" He was very fit looking, dark-skinned and wearing a funny kind of helmet we'd never seen before. We were accustomed to the old, flat variety. Someone answered him. "We've been in here for a long time. Who are you?" "I'm from Ohio with the First Cavalry," he replied. "You mean you're an American?" He said yes, and then someone shouted, "Well then, dammit, give me a Lucky Strike!" He didn't have a Lucky but he did give the guy a Camel. We knew right then that the Yanks and tanks were back and we were free.

Dr. Smith and the Bilibid survivors had their first American food in many years that day and shortly thereafter he began the long trip back from the Philippines by way of Leyte, Peleliu, Honolulu, and San Francisco, arriving home on 17 March 1945. He was hospitalized at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, MD, for 16 months and, declared unfit for further service, retired from the Navy in 1946 with the Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. His eyesight improved slightly, allowing him to return to medical school, after which he passed the boards in internal medicine and became a fellow of the American College of Physicians. He worked part-time for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad for over 26 years while maintaining a private practice. He then became medical director of the Federal Reserve in Richmond, VA.